

That which is claimed is:

1. A method of automatically forwarding a response to a message to the sender of the message, comprising:

(a) prompting the sender to provide a message;

5 (b) prompting the sender to identify a recipient, the recipient having a plurality of associated contact numbers;

(c) prompting a user to rank the associated contact numbers relating to the recipient identified in response to step (b) from highest to lowest;

10 (d) sending the message provided in response to step (a) to the highest ranked associated contact number to which the message has not yet been sent;

(e) prompting the recipient of the message to provide a reply to the message;

(f) waiting at least a predetermined amount of time;

15 (g) if no response to the message is received, repeating steps (d) through (g) with respect to the next highest ranked associated contact number until a response is received or the message has been sent to all associated contact numbers; and

(h) forwarding the response to the sender.

2. The method of claim 1, wherein the call time of the sender is less than the call time of the recipient.

3. The method of claim 1, wherein the call time of the sender is less than the call 20 time of the sender would have been had the sender communicated with the recipient by multi-party telephone call.

4. The method of claim 1, wherein the channel of communication utilized by the recipient for sending the response is the same as the channel of communication utilized by the sender for sending the message.

5. The method of claim 1, wherein the channel of communication utilized by the recipient for sending the response is different from the channel of communication utilized by the sender for sending the message.
6. The method of claim 1, wherein the channel of communication utilized by the
5 sender for sending the message is e-mail.
7. The method of claim 1, wherein the channel of communication utilized by the sender for sending the message is paging.
8. The method of claim 1, wherein the channel of communication utilized by the sender for sending the message is by automated telephone call.
- 10 9. The method of claim 8, further comprising the step of:
 - (i) if the automated telephone call sent in step (d) is connected but after the performance of step (f) no response to the message has been received, prompting the recipient to reply to the telephone call at a later time.
10. The method of claim 1, wherein the channel of communication utilized by the
15 sender for sending the message is by facsimile.
11. The method of claim 1, further comprising:
 - (i) repeating steps (b) through (h) with respect to one or more additional recipients.
12. The method of claim 11, wherein each response forwarded to the sender in an
20 iteration of step (h) is forwarded separately from responses forwarded in other iterations of step (h).
13. The method of claim 11, wherein two or more responses forwarded to the sender in different iterations of step (h) are forwarded together.
14. The method of claim 13, wherein the two or more responses forwarded together
25 are forwarded as part of a composite report.

15. The method of claim 14, wherein the composite report comprises a listing of each successful message transmission.

16. The method of claim 14, wherein the composite report comprises a listing of each response.

5 17. The method of claim 14, wherein the composite report comprises summary data relating to all of the responses.

18. The method of claim 11, further comprising:

(j) prompting the current recipient to indicate whether to send the current recipient's response to the other recipients of the sender's message; and

10 (k) if the current recipient indicates in response to step (j) that the response should be sent to the other recipients, sending the current recipient's response to the other recipients of the sender's message.

19. The method of claim 1, wherein the user prompted to rank the plurality of associated contact numbers in step (c) is the sender.

15 20. The method of claim 1, wherein the user prompted to rank the plurality of associated contact numbers in step (c) is the recipient.

21. The method of claim 1, wherein the user prompted to rank the plurality of associated contact numbers in step (c) is neither the sender nor the recipient.

20 22. The method of claim 1, wherein if the user fails to provide a ranking of associated contact numbers in response to step (c), a default ranking is used in steps (d) through (g).

23. The method of claim 1, further comprising:

(i) prompting a user to rank the associated contact numbers relating to the recipient identified in response to step (b) from highest to lowest in a second ordering

25 and to supply a condition,

wherein, if the user provides a second ranking in response to step (i), the ordering utilized in steps (d) through (h) is selected based on the condition.

24. The method of claim 23, wherein the condition comprises a criterion relating to the time of day at which the message is being sent.

5 25. The method of claim 23, wherein the condition comprises a criterion relating to the day of the week on which the message is being sent.

26. The method of claim 23, wherein the condition comprises a criterion relating to the identity of the sender.

27. The method of claim 23, wherein the condition comprises a criterion relating to 10 the content of the message.

28. The method of claim 1, further comprising:

(i) prompting a user to provide an expiration time for at least one associated contact number,

15 wherein if the expiration time of an associated contact number has passed prior to the performance of an iteration of step (d), the expired associated contact number is not utilized in the performance of the current and any subsequent iterations of step (d).

29. The method of claim 1, further comprising:

(i) prompting a user to provide a commencement time for at least one associated contact number,

20 wherein if the performance of an iteration of step (d) occurs prior to the commencement time of an associated contact number, the associated contact number is not utilized in the performance of the current iteration of step (d).

30. The method of claim 1, further comprising:

(i) prompting a user to provide a start time,

wherein, if a user provides a start time in response to step (i), steps (d) through (h) are delayed until the start time.

31. The method of claim 1, wherein the predetermined amount of time is equal to zero seconds.

5 32. The method of claim 1, wherein the predetermined amount of time exceeds zero seconds.

33. The method of claim 1, wherein the predetermined amount of time depends on the channel of communication used for sending the message in the current iteration of step (d).

10 34. The method of claim 1, further comprising:

(i) prompting a user to provide an amount of time,

wherein, if the user provides an amount of time in response to step (i), the predetermined amount of time in step (f) is equal to the amount of time provided by the user in response to step (i).

15 35. The method of claim 1, further comprising:

(i) converting a verbal message provided by the sender in response to step (a) into textual form.

36. The method of claim 35, wherein the message is sent to at least one recipient by e-mail.

20 37. The method of claim 1, further comprising:

(i) converting a verbal response provided by the recipient in response to step (e) into textual form.

38. The method of claim 1, wherein step (a) is performed over the Web;

wherein step (a) comprises prompting the sender to provide a message subject, a message body, one or more prompts to be provided to the recipient, and a type of data to be collected;

wherein step (a) further comprises prompting the sender to provide a message to
5 be provided if the message is sent by telephone call and the telephone call is answered by a voicemail system;

wherein the response of the recipient to the message is received using automatic speech recognition if the message is sent to a telephone number;

wherein step (b) comprises providing a searchable address book to the sender;
10 and

wherein step (d) comprises, in the case of a message being sent to an associated contact number that includes a telephone extension, automatically dialing both the telephone number and the telephone extension.

39. The method of claim 35, wherein the response is sent to the sender by e-mail.

15 40. The method of claim 1, wherein if the transmission of a message using an associated contact number is not successful in step (d), the message is retransmitted to the same associated contact number until the message is successfully transmitted to the associated contact number or until a predetermined number of transmissions have been unsuccessful.

20 41. The method of claim 1, further comprising:

(i) prompting the recipient to indicate the recipient's response is urgent,
wherein, if the recipient indicates that the response is urgent, the response is sent to the sender within a predetermined amount of time.

42. The method of claim 1, further comprising:

25 (i) prompting a sender to contact an operator,

wherein the operator has access to data relating to the sender's message.

43. The method of claim 1, wherein the message provided by the sender in response to step (a) comprises a plurality of questions; and

wherein the recipient is prompted in step (e) to provide an answer to each
5 question in the sender's message.

44. A method of automatically forwarding a response to a message to the sender of the message, comprising steps for:

(a) receiving a message and a ranked set of associated contact numbers from the sender;

10 (b) sending the message received in step (a) to the recipient at the highest ranked associated contact number to which the message can be successfully sent;

(c) receiving a reply to the message from the recipient; and

(d) forwarding the response to the sender.

45. A system for automatically forwarding a response to a message to the sender of the message, comprising:

means for prompting the sender to provide a message;

means for prompting the sender to identify a recipient, the recipient having a plurality of associated contact numbers;

means for prompting a user to rank the associated contact numbers relating to the 20 recipient identified by the sender from highest to lowest;

means for sending the message provided by the sender to the highest ranked associated contact number to which the message has not yet been sent;

means for prompting the recipient of the message to provide a reply to the message;

25 means for waiting at least a predetermined amount of time;

PROCESSED - FAXED - EMAILED - SCANNED

means for repeatedly sending the message provided by the sender to the highest ranked associated contact number to which the message has not yet been sent, prompting the recipient of the message to provide a reply to the message, and waiting at least a predetermined amount of time until a response is received or the message has been sent

5 to all associated contact numbers; if no response to the message is received; and

means for forwarding the response to the sender.

46. A computer-readable medium having stored thereon computer-executable instructions for performing the steps comprising:

(a) prompting the sender to provide a message;

10 (b) prompting the sender to identify a recipient, the recipient having a plurality of associated contact numbers;

(c) prompting a user to rank the associated contact numbers relating to the recipient identified in response to step (b) from highest to lowest;

15 (d) sending the message provided in response to step (a) to the highest ranked associated contact number to which the message has not yet been sent;

(e) prompting the recipient of the message to provide a reply to the message;

(f) waiting at least a predetermined amount of time;

(g) if no response to the message is received, repeating steps (d) through (g)

with respect to the next highest ranked associated contact number until a response is

20 received or the message has been sent to all associated contact numbers; and

(h) forwarding the response to the sender.

47. A system for automatically forwarding a response to a message to the sender of the message, comprising:

a processor;

25 a memory connected to said processor;

at least one communication interface in communication with said processor;

a display in communication with said processor; and

an input device in communication with said processor,

wherein said processor causes the sender to be prompted to provide a message;

5 wherein said processor causes the sender to be prompted to identify a recipient, the recipient having a plurality of associated contact numbers;

wherein said processor causes a user to be prompted to rank the associated contact numbers relating to the identified recipient from highest to lowest;

wherein said processor causes the message to be sent to the highest ranked

10 associated contact number to which the message has not yet been sent;

wherein said processor causes the recipient of the message to be prompted to provide a reply to the message;

wherein said processor waits at least a predetermined amount of time;

wherein said processor repeatedly causes the message provided by the sender to

15 be sent to the highest ranked associated contact number to which the message has not yet been sent, said processor causes the recipient of the message to be prompted to provide a reply to the message, and said processor waits at least a predetermined amount of time until a response is received or the message has been sent to all associated contact numbers; if no response to the message is received; and

20 wherein said processor causes the response to be forwarded to the sender.

48. The system of claim 47, wherein said communication interface comprises an Internet connection.

49. The system of claim 47, wherein said communication interface comprises a facsimile device.

50. The system of claim 47, wherein said communication interface comprises a telephone connection.

51. The system of claim 47, wherein said communication interface comprises voice recognition code.

5 52. The system of claim 47, wherein said input device comprises a keypad.

53. The system of claim 47, wherein said input device comprises a microphone.

54. The system of claim 47, wherein said input device comprises a keyboard.

55. The system of claim 47, wherein said input device comprises a pointing device.

56. The system of claim 47, further comprising:

10 at least one database stored in said memory.

57. The system of claim 56, wherein said at least one database comprises at least one table for storing associated contact numbers, at least one table for storing unsent messages, and at least one table for storing data relating to expected responses to messages.

15 58. A method of processing messages, comprising:

prompting each of a plurality of senders to send a message using one of a plurality of interfaces, including at least a telephone interface and an e-mail interface;

prompting a recipient to select an interface by which messages are to be forwarded to the recipient from a plurality of interfaces, including at least a telephone interface and an e-mail interface; and

forwarding each message sent by the plurality of senders to the recipient utilizing the interface selected by the recipient in step (b).

59. A method of processing inbound and outbound messages, comprising:

(a) prompting an inbound recipient to provide at least one associated contact 25 number;

- (b) prompting a sender to provide a message;
- (c) prompting the sender to identify a recipient, the recipient having at least one associated contact number; and
- (d) sending the message to at least one of the at least one associated contact

5 number,

[] wherein, if the message is an outbound message, the sender is prompted to provide the message over the Web in step (b); and

[] wherein, if the message is an inbound message, the recipient is prompted to provide at least one associated contact number in step (a).

10 60. The method of claim 59, wherein the recipient identified in step (c) is the inbound recipient prompted in step (a).

61. The method of claim 59, wherein the recipient identified in step (c) is an outbound recipient.

62. A method of processing inbound messages, comprising:

15 (a) prompting a sender to provide a message in voice form;

(b) prompting the sender to identify a recipient, the recipient having at least one associated contact number;

[] (c) converting the message provided by the sender in response to step (a) to text form; and

20 (d) sending the message to at least one of the at least one associated contact number.

63. A method of processing outbound messages, comprising:

(a) prompting a sender to provide a message in voice form;

(b) prompting the sender to identify a recipient, the recipient having at least 25 one associated contact number;

- (c) converting the message provided by the sender in response to step (a) to text form; and
- (d) sending the message to at least one of the at least one associated contact number.

5 64. A method of automatically forwarding a response to a message to the sender of the message, comprising:

- (a) prompting a sender to provide a message;
- (b) prompting the sender to identify a recipient;
- (c) placing a telephone call to the recipient;
- 10 (d) providing the message and a set of prompts to the recipient if the recipient answers the telephone call;
- (e) automatically recording a message including a telephone number to call back if the telephone call is answered by a voicemail system; and
- (f) if the recipient places a telephone call to the telephone number provided

15 in step (e), providing the message and a set of prompts to the recipient.

65. A method of processing outbound messages, comprising:

- (a) prompting a sender to provide a message;
- (b) prompting the sender to identify a recipient, the recipient having at least one associated contact number;
- 20 (c) prompting the sender to customize at least one of the time at which the message will be sent, the text of at least one prompt, the number of prompts in the set of prompts to be provided to the recipient, the number of iterations of the set of prompts, and the type of data to be received in response to at least one prompt;
- (d) sending the message to at least one of the at least one associated contact number; and

(e) providing at least one prompt to the recipient.

66. The method of claim 65, further comprising:

(f) validating data received in response to a prompt provided in step (e) based at least in part on a data type relating to the prompt received in response to step (c).

5 67. A method of processing inbound messages, comprising:

(a) prompting a sender to provide a message;

(b) prompting the sender to identify a recipient, the recipient having at least one associated contact number;

(c) prompting the recipient to customize at least one of the text of at least one 10 prompt, the number of prompts in the set of prompts to be provided to the sender, the number of iterations of the set of prompts, and the type of data to be received in response to at least one prompt;

(d) providing at least one prompt to the sender; and

(e) sending the message to at least one of the at least one associated contact 15 number.

68. The method of claim 65, further comprising:

(f) validating data received in response to a prompt provided in step (e) based at least in part on a data type relating to the prompt received in response to step (c).